Report of GTTN’s Discussion Session on Yemen Crisis and Pakistan
April 8, 2015

1. Introduction

On the 8th of April, 2015, Global Think Tank Network (GTTN) at the National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST), Islamabad, organized a special session of its experts to discuss the ongoing Middle Eastern crisis of Yemen and Pakistan’s likely role in it. The discussion focussed on the question of the correct Pakistani response to the Saudi request to join the coalition of Arab States put together to deal with the crisis in Yemen. It was accepted that Saudi Arabia’s request to the Government of Pakistan (GoP) to contribute its troops to the anti-Houthi Saudi-led joint Arab Military had put Pakistan in a delicate situation.

The experts were unanimous in declaring the crisis to be very serious for Pakistan and that it was fast snowballing. This rapid development demanded an equally swift but accurate analysis. It was also underscored that the accuracy of estimation could only be known in practice which in turn depended on the strategic, diplomatic, and official adroitness with which the government acted on any given policy option.

2. Discussion
2.1. The 21st century Middle East

The experts agreed that the political situation in the Middle East was markedly different from what it had been since the end of the Second World War in 1945 till the end of the twentieth century.

During this period, the fundamental problem in the Middle East was the Israeli-Arab rivalry centred on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Starting from about 1990 – the year of Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait and the subsequent invasion of Iraq by the US-led coalition – Israeli-Arab rivalry started to be relegated to a secondary position by the renewed salience of inter-Arab differences.

The dawn of the twenty-first century saw the launch of the fight against terrorism as the dominant mode of big-power intervention in two crucial geopolitical theatres, South Asia and Middle East in 2001 and 2003, respectively, ostensibly in the name of preservation of global peace, stability and security. Particularly in the Middle East, this so-called humanitarian intervention had had the effect of intensifying the Sunni-Shiite sectarian strife that had been lulled into an uneasy calm for the greater part of the twentieth century.

It concomitantly led to the attenuation of Arab nationalism and the re-inscription of sectarian identity in the Middle Eastern politics. This attenuation afforded Iran the opportunity to accelerate its efforts to assert influence across the Arab world through supporting regimes as well as various shades of popular, political, social movements that were aligned with its political worldview and religious ideology, threatening the status of Saudi Arabia as the leading Sunni Islamic Arab state in the Middle East.

Staring in the autumn of 2010 and facilitated by the processes of spontaneous and conscious cultural diffusion, the arrival of the pattern of large-scale social media-coordinated social protest from Eastern and Central Europe’s Colour Revolutions ignited mass protest in countries across North Africa and Middle East against the traditional systems of political authority that bred political disenfranchisement, social organization that ensured marginalization and limited mobility, and economic distribution that maintained inequality and widened income disparity amongst different social groups.

This “Arab Spring” succeeded in toppling entrenched political structures and personalities in countries like Tunisia and Egypt, led to armed overthrow of the ruling government in Libya, failed in Bahrain due to Saudi intervention, sparked a continuing civil war in Syria, and fuelled a long-simmering civil conflict in Yemen that had now exacerbated into a regional crisis.

It was noted that the contemporary Middle East, in
two cases at least, namely, the absence of Israel as the primary source of conflict in the Middle East and the existential angst about the future of their statehood felt by the Arab States, was reminiscent of the immediate post-World War I years in which the foundations of the modern Arab State system were laid.

### 2.2. Points for Pakistan to consider

The experts recognised that:

i. the Arab-Israeli conflict did not appear to be the fundamental contradiction of the region;

ii. the Arab State System was undeniably facing different challenges;

iii. primary amongst these challenges was sectarian Sunni-Shiite conflict on a regional scale;

iv. this conflict was allied to unresolved political, economic, and social contradictions in the region;

v. US-NATO intervention coupled with the Arab Spring had accelerated this shift from Jewish-Arab to internal contradictions of the Arab State system that included Sunni-Shiite sectarian conflict;

vi. these contradictions were further aggravated by the increase in the youth populations of the region;

vii. collectively, these challenges had considerably weakened the Arab State system and Arab nationalism;

viii. after a period of prolonged and intensive armed engagement in the region, US-NATO was following a policy of minimum direct intervention;

ix. intra-state civil conflict had a high potential of becoming inter-state conflict in the region;

x. in the case of Yemen, this fateful potential had been realised without the outbreak of full-scale war yet;

xi. the effects of the Middle Eastern conflicts could now also spill over in South Asia because of high complex interdependence between Pakistan and Persian Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia; and

xii. the stabilization of Middle East in the long run had to be a native effort of the countries in the region assisted in all possibly legitimate ways by allied Muslim countries.

### 2.3. The crisis in Yemen

Although the situation in Yemen had regional drivers, yet the ongoing crisis was largely a result of the internal factors and contradictions that had been present in the country for a long time. These turbulent internal conditions had been the result of the uneasy unification of North and South Yemen in 1990. The question of power-sharing amongst elites of the two halves after unification was never resolved satisfactorily. The perception of marginalisation amongst the former South had contributed to the aggravation of North-South differences which led to civil protests and conflict only four years after the unification in 1994.

In Yemen, political, sectarian, ideological, and tribal rivalries were intertwined in such a manner that conflict that began on a tribal basis could easily become sectarian and political and vice versa. The ongoing crisis was a manifestation of this lethal fluidity of Yemeni politics. While the present conflict in Yemen was primarily political in nature, Sunni-Shiite divide in the larger Muslim world had cast it in sectarian terms. Saudi-Iranian support of warring factions in Yemen had further strengthened this perception. It was not difficult to see that perceptions could easily shape reality and bring into being what was being perceived.

The current crisis in Yemen was preceded by almost a decade of civil strife and conflict. The Houthi, espousing Zaydi Shiism, first rose against the government in Sanaa in 2004 leading to a ceasefire agreement between the government and Houthis in 2007 and then again in 2010. During this decade, the Yemeni government had fought Al-Qaeda, which morphed into Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in 2009, with US
and Saudi assistance. It was noted that AQAP was a common enemy to both Yemeni government and the Houthis.

The current crisis had emerged out of the pro-reform protests and demonstrations that erupted in Yemen in early 2011 against the government of the former President Ali Abdullah Saleh which led to his removal and, following a interregnum in which a unity government was briefly in place, to the uncontested election of Abd Rabbah Mansur Hadi as the President in early 2012.

The failure to craft a new social contract and a power-sharing formula in the form of a new constitution that was widely acceptable to the masses put paid to any prospects of peace and reconciliation of opposing factions and led to the uprising which saw Houthis take control of the capital Sanaa in September 2014 and then in March 2015.1 The Houthi resurgence caused Saudi-led coalition of Arab States to mount airstrikes against the rebels in March 2015 following which Saudis asked Pakistan to join the coalition.

2.4. Points for Pakistan to consider

The experts recognized that:

i. the crisis in Yemen was not an isolated case but could only be understood as part of the geopolitical dynamics of Middle East;

ii. the Middle East of the 21st century was one in which there were credible threats to the foundations of the Arab state system;

iii. the threat right now to the security of Saudi Arabia from Houthis was not too great but the evolution of the crisis could lead to instability in Saudi Arabia;

iv. if Saudi Arabia were to become unstable, it would be detrimental for Pakistani interests;

v. Pakistan enjoyed long-standing relations based on complex interdependence with Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia;

vi. Saudi apprehensions of the crisis in Yemen and its spill-over into Saudi Arabia had to be fully taken into account;

vii. in the light of the strength of Pak-Saudi relations, Pakistan had limited options in so far the Saudi request was concerned;

viii. the diplomatic space available to Pakistan in this crisis was very tight;

ix. the appointment of a high-level working group with a Special Envoy at its head could, perhaps, be one way of carrying forward the diplomatic initiative for dealing with the crisis;

x. the appointment of a Foreign Minister with immense experience and proven credentials was even more important;

xi. for Pakistan, there was need, as part of the diplomatic initiative, to urge the UN to take initiative that would lead to the peaceful resolution of the whole crisis.

xii. neutrality, especially, was a poor option for Pakistan;

xiii. implications of Pakistan's decision on the Saudi request to join the anti-Houthi coalition of Arab States would be far-reaching;

xiv. historically, foreign military intervention never really panned out in Yemen;

xv. whether it was Ottomans in the 19th century or Egypt in the 1960s, invading forces got bogged down in the difficult terrain and were repulsed by the battle-ready hardy tribes of the country;

xvi. Pakistan was already engaged in a full-fledged war against terrorism on its own territory with its armed forces appreciably stretched in the fight against the forces of terrorism and secession;

xvii. on one hand, the decision not to join the coalition could result in adverse consequences for

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1- The Islamic State (IS) also launched its first attacks in Yemen in March 2015.
the Pakistani economy considering the volume of remittances, hydrocarbon imports, financial aid and other concessions from Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia;

xviii. on the other hand, the decision to join could result in the undesired but inevitable aggravation of sectarian troubles at home which could have serious economic, political and social consequences;

xix. while Pakistan was a decisive and strong Saudi ally, Iran was Pakistan's neighbour and a fellow Muslim country and its sensitivities and intentions had also to be considered to strengthen Pak-Iran relations preventing them from becoming antagonistic or hostile;

xx. US-Iran nuclear deal would create strategic elbow room for Iran to support Shiite elements in various Middle Eastern countries as well as try to leverage its post-deal freedom of manoeuvre against Pakistan;

xxi. China's cautious response to the whole crisis and its preference for peaceful resolution to the crisis had to be taken into deep consideration;

xxii. the implications of Pakistan's involvement in the crisis in Yemen needed to be addressed from the standpoint of its impact on the inter-regional integration envisaged by China's land-based New Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Route;

xxiii. since Russia was a major global player, traditionally involved in West Asia, and since Pakistan's relations with Russia had experienced a cautious but sure thaw in a very long time, the Russian attitude to the crisis, which was not pro-Saudi, had to be considered;

xxiv. the threat of the Indian exploitation of the delay between Saudi request and Pakistani response and disconnect between Iranian and Pakistani positions was a question that had to be addressed fully by the policymakers;

xxv. the current policy of US-NATO in the Middle East was non-intervention but it could be reversed if the conflict in Yemen developed in ways that could prove threatening to energy supply of the West and Israel or if AQAP-IS became too strong to be resisted by either the Houthis or the Saudi-led coalition and if they threatened to spread to the West;

xxvi. AQAP-IS-Daish elements could also head toward Pakistan and lead to the reversal of some of the hard-won gains by the country in its fight against terrorism;

xxvii. while the situation was a huge challenge, it, at the same time, offered Pakistan an opportunity to play an important role in the region that could lead to increased credibility and status of Pakistan in the Middle East;

xxviii. that the principle of non-intervention, in so far as sovereign states were concerned, had to be given the supreme consideration and it was of the essence to prevent the pattern of coalition formation for intervention into sovereign states from becoming an internationally expected and accepted practice since it violated the fundamental principle of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the nation-state as the foundation of the current inter-state system; and

xxix. the paramount consideration should be given to Pakistan's sovereignty, stability, peace, and security and its responsibilities towards its long-standing allies had to weighed against this paramount consideration.

2.5. Pakistan’s response options

Based on the deliberation of the experts, the following response options could be formulated:

i. Neutrality: Refusal to take sides at any point during the conflict/crisis.

ii. Offensive intervention: Commit military force and full-spectrum military support to Saudi Arabia and be willing to carry the fight into Yemen for as long as required.

2- These options are ranked in a descending order of advisability with the first one as the least advisable and the fifth one as the most advisable.
iii. Defensive intervention: Commit military force and armed support purely for the defence of Saudi Arabia and its territory repelling any attack on its territory but not fighting on Yemeni soil.

iv. Active non-Intervention: Exclusive focus on the utilization of diplomatic channels and engagement of diplomatic means for the end to the crisis but stopping short of committing troops or military support.

v. Comprehensive response: Combines the key elements of defensive intervention and active non-intervention with a concerted military, diplomatic, political, economic, and social strategy that could stress the first-order need to end the conflict decisively and could mean the formation and deployment of a Muslim multi-national peace keeping force in Yemen and the second-order need to confront and contain the possible sectarian back-lash and spread of IS-Daish propaganda and militancy in Pakistan.

3. Recommendations

The following recommendations were proposed on the basis of the most desirable fifth option of, namely, the comprehensive response:

i. Pakistan should immediately begin a bilateral and multilateral diplomatic initiative to reassure friendly countries, both Muslim and otherwise, making it clear that Pakistan’s participation in the conflict was purely non-sectarian without any suggestion of any sectarian motive and solely on the basis of the legitimate principles of international politics;

ii. this bilateral and multilateral diplomatic initiative, including the UN as well as other fora, should be conducted at the highest level by the Prime Minister of Pakistan;

iii. the Prime Minister should immediately fill the vacant portfolio of the Foreign Minister with a person of great experience and sterling credentials for leading this diplomatic initiative;

iv. the proposal to form a Muslim multinational peacekeeping force for Yemen should be discussed as part of its diplomatic initiative;

v. the justification for Pakistan’s participation should be sought from the prevalent norms and standards of legitimacy of the inter-state system;

vi. Pakistan should commit troops and military support with precise and clear limits to involvement in the Saudi-led coalition and its joint Arab force which should clearly spell out the defensive nature of Pakistan’s commitment as explained above and only if there was an imminent credible threat to Saudi territorial integrity;

vii. Pakistan should create a broad trans-sectarian understanding in Pakistan convoking the leading Ulema (religious scholars) of different Sunni and Shiite sects in the country for preventing the possible domestic sectarian blow-back from its involvement in the crisis; and

viii. Pakistan should avoid as much as possible immature and premature public opinion-mongering on the issue.

3- In so far as relations and bilateral and multilateral contacts with Muslim countries are concerned, Pakistan also needs to enlighten its diplomatic efforts, initiatives, and communication by seeking guidance from the following verse of the Holy Quran: “And if two factions among the believers should fight, then make settlement between the two. But if one of them oppresses the other, then fight against the one that oppresses until it returns to the ordinance of Allah. And if it returns, then make settlement between them in justice and act justly. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly” (Verse 9 of the 49th Surah of the Holy Quran, Al-Hujurat or The Dwellings). If Shia-Sunni divide is the politicization of religion, then it becomes worth a try to utilize the relevant injunctions of the Holy Quran for peace making amongst Muslims or at least explaining the basis of actions to brotherly Muslim states in terms of the clear and plain injunctions of the Holy Quran.
**Postscript:** It is important to note here that on the 10th of April, 2015, the Government of Pakistan, after a debate on the issue of Pakistan's response to Yemen crisis in the Parliament, proclaimed to uphold its commitment to the defence of Saudi Arabia's territorial integrity but endorsed neutrality as long as the defence of Saudi Arabia was not jeopardised. On the 14th of April, 2015, the UN Security Council, in its Resolution 2216, placed an arms embargo on the Houthi leaders and demanded the Houthi withdrawal from the capital, Sanaa, as well as all areas under their control. It is important to note the resolution was passed by a vote of 14-0 with the abstention of Russia which wanted the embargo to be on Yemen as a whole. On the 16th of April, 2015, Pakistan vowed to fully help in the implementation of the UNSC Resolution 2216, while reiterating its support for Saudi Arabia.